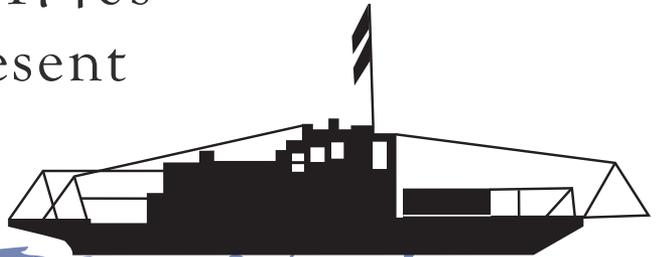


WOODLAND FERRY:

Crossing the Nanticoke River
from the 1740s
to the present



WELCOME!

This short history of the Woodland Ferry, which is listed in the National Register of Historic Places, was written to mark the commissioning of a new ferryboat, the *Tina Fallon*, in 2008. It is an interesting and colorful story.

TIMELINE

1608 Captain John Smith explores the Nanticoke River, and encounters Nanticoke Indians. Native Americans have resided in the region for thousands of years

1734 James Cannon purchases a land tract called *Cannon's Regulation* at Woodland

1743? James Cannon starts operating a ferry

1748 A wharf is mentioned at the ferry

1751 James Cannon dies and his son Jacob takes over the ferry

1766 A tax of 1,500 lbs. of tobacco is paid "to Jacob Cannon for keeping a Ferry over Nanticoke River the Year past"

1780 Jacob Cannon dies and leaves ferry to his wife Betty

1793 Betty and son Isaac Cannon are granted exclusive ferrying rights at Cannon's Ferry for a period of fourteen years

1807 Betty and Isaac Cannon are granted exclusive ferrying privileges for another ten years, despite complaints and petitions

1828 Death of Betty Cannon

1843 Jacob Cannon Jr. murdered at the wharf. Brother Isaac Cannon dies one month later. Ferry passes to their sister Luraney Boling

1845 Inventory of Luraney Boling's estate includes "one wood scow, one schooner, one large old scow, two small old scows, one ferry scow, one old and worn out chain cable, one lot of old cable chains and two scow chains, on and about the wharves"

1883 Delaware General Assembly passes an act authorizing the Levy Court of Sussex County to establish and maintain a ferry at Woodland

1885 William Ellis paid an annual salary of \$119.99 by Sussex County for operating the ferry

1930 Model "T" engine attached to the wooden ferryboat

1935 Delaware State Highway Department assumes responsibility for the maintenance of all county roads and associated structures including Woodland Ferry

1937 State Highway Department purchases a new timber ferryboat

1961 New ferryboat, the *Virginia C*, comes into service

2008 *Tina Fallon* ferryboat brought into service

THE NANTICOKE RIVER

The Nanticoke River is named after the Native Americans (“people of the tidewaters”) who were living along its banks when Englishman John Smith explored the area in the summer of 1608. The river runs for about 63 miles from its headwaters in Sussex County, Delaware to its mouth at Tangier Sound, Dorchester County, Maryland. It is an ecologically diverse waterway with habitats of national significance for many threatened plants and animals. It has the highest concentration of bald eagles in the northeastern United States. It is part of the National Park Service’s Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail. The river is tidal as far as Seaford, upstream of the Woodland Ferry (information from the Nanticoke Watershed Alliance).



Woodland and the Woodland Ferry lie about 3.5 miles southwest of Seaford in southwestern Sussex County, Delaware, close to the border with Maryland.



HOW TO CROSS A RIVER

Ferries were important places in early America. Bridges were rare because they were expensive to build and maintain. Rivers could be crossed at shallows (fords), but to cross a wider or deeper river, a ferry was needed.

Typically, at a ferry crossing you had to wait for a while until the boat arrived. There was usually a tavern where you could buy food and drink, read newspapers and notices, and exchange information and gossip with other travelers and the local people. In a land that was still thinly populated, a ferry crossing provided an opportunity to socialize. Communities often developed around ferry landings, as one did at Woodland.



The earliest known photo of the ferry (probably about 1900, based on the style of the two men's clothing). The ferryman (possibly William B. Ellis) is poling the ferry. Note the guide cable that keeps the boat on course. The Methodist Church is visible at top left in the village of Woodland.



THE CANNON FAMILY AND THE FERRY

For more than 100 years, the Woodland Ferry was part of a Cannon family business operating on the Nanticoke River. Historical research has not discovered an exact date, but evidence suggests that James Cannon established the ferry here between 1734 and 1748. Certainly by 1748, there were a “warf [wharf] and two houses” here because they are mentioned in James’ will of that year. The Proceedings and Acts of the General Assembly of Maryland record that in 1766 a tax of 1,500 lbs. of tobacco was paid to Jacob Cannon (James’ son) “for keeping a Ferry over Nanticoke River the Year past.” These early references, however, provide no information on the appearance of the ferry at Woodland.

The most colorful period in the history of the ferry started with the death of Jacob in 1780 (see inset). Jacob’s widow Betty and their two sons Isaac and Jacob (Junior) then operated the ferry for more than 60 years. In seeking

to take over the ferry Betty claimed that she “laid out considerable sums of money in erecting and making wharves and landing places on both sides of the River Nanticoke,” and had “also been at considerable expence (expense) in improving the Road leading to the said Ferry.”

Partly on the basis of these claims, in 1793 the Delaware General Assembly granted Betty and her older son Isaac exclusive ferrying rights at Cannon’s Ferry. Charges were five cents for the ferrying of each person and horse, 10

Poor Service at the Ferry in the Early 1800s

The Cannons did not have a very good reputation as ferry operators. In 1802 James Hemphill complained in his journal that there was no tavern at the ferry, the ferryboat (a scow) was too small, and that he had even had to help with the rowing. In 1807 local petitioners complained that they had to “wait very often in the cold rain and snow for hours” for the ferry to come across the river.



cents for every two-wheeled carriage, and 30 cents for every four-wheeled carriage. In 1802 customers were rowed across the river in a small scow (a flat-bottomed boat with a sloping square bow and stern). This Cannon family monopoly does not seem to have served the public well, and in the following years there were complaints about the ferry (see inset).

Betty and sons Isaac and Jacob lived at Cannons Ferry, and from there they controlled a large merchant and shipping operation. The ferry was merely a part of the business. Cannon Hall, which still stands on the right bank near the ferry landing (see photographs), was reputedly built by Jacob around 1820 for his bride-to-be. The story reported in the 1938 Federal Writers' Project of the Works Project Administration is that he never lived in the home when she jilted him before the marriage.

By 1816 the two brothers owned more than 5,000 acres of land on the Delmarva Peninsula and a number of ships that traded between Seaford and Baltimore. They were also slaveholders, and as late as 1840 they still owned at least 30 slaves. Jacob and Isaac acquired much of their land through foreclosures, and they also lent money at interest. These activities made them unpopular: Sussex County resident William Morgan reported that Isaac Cannon "emptied victuals from cooking pots and took beds away from the sick in an effort to collect his debts."

Patty Cannon – Slave Catcher

While Betty and her sons were running their ferry business, their relatives Patty and Jesse Cannon were working in the less reputable world of slave trading. Operating out of Joe Johnson's tavern in Reliance, Maryland, four miles northwest of Cannon's Ferry, these Cannons kidnapped blacks, both free and slave, and sold them to slave dealers in the Deep South. Historian George Alfred Townsend connected the ferry to these activities in his 1884 book *the Entailed Hat*, but there is no firm evidence that shows this to be the case.



After Betty Cannon died in 1828, her two sons continued the operation until fate caught up with them. On April 10, 1843 Jacob Cannon stepped off his ferry to find one Owen O'Day waiting for him on the wharf. Cannon had earlier accused O'Day of stealing a "bee gum", a hollow log holding a bee's nest and honey, from him. The dispute was ugly and O'Day shot Jacob dead on the Cannon's wharf.

The Cannons were so despised by this time (see inset) that O'Day was able to avoid trial and flee west to freedom. At the time, William Morgan wrote in his journal that the Cannon brothers' passing was 'unlamented and unmourned' by most of the community. Isaac died a month later, and an era was over.

AFTER THE CANNONS

From 1843 to 1883 the ferry and the surrounding properties were owned by Jacob and Isaac's sister Luraney and her descendants. In 1845 there were five scows of various sizes at the ferry site. Mention of cable chains suggests that by this time the ferry was already using a guide cable system to hold the ferry on course as it crossed the river.

The ferry service seems to have declined or even ceased. In 1883 Sussex County took over the operation, acquiring land, improving the causeway, and purchasing a new ferryboat. The County also decided not to charge a fee for the use of the ferry.

William Morgan gives his assessment on Isaac and Jacob Cannon in 1843

"After fifty years, cheating, oppressing and distressing, selling and takeing [taking] every thing they could lay hold of, there they ly [lie] in the [their] graves unlamented and unmourned by any except a few flatters [flatterers]. One for his oppression and cruelty was shot in cold blood and died as a beast. The other was permitted to die in his bed! But *money was his God*. Two [other] such men have not lived in this county, and we hope two other never may."



THE 20TH CENTURY AND BEYOND

The next big improvement to the ferry came in 1930, when the engine from a Model T Ford was attached to the ferryboat. The engine was connected to the guide cable and winched the ferryboat across the river. The days of muscle power were over. A 1935 state law placed responsibility for the ferry with the Delaware State Highway Department. In 1937 a new ferryboat came into service. This may have been replaced or remodeled in the years after World War II. In the late 1950s the ferryboat was briefly known as the *Patty Cannon*.

There was at least one fatal accident during this time in which ferry passengers drowned when their car backed off of the ferryboat. This incident caused DelDOT to acquire a new ferryboat.

In 1961 a local newspaper reported that the state of Delaware spent \$50,000 to purchase an all-steel, cable-guided ferryboat (Newspaper Clippings Collection, Delaware Public Archives). Named the *Virginia C* in honor of the wife of Highway Commissioner Mr. Dallas D. Culver, this ferry could hold up to three cars and was powered by a 122-horsepower diesel engine.



Woodland Ferry in c. 1930-37 with Model T Ford engine, which was added about 1930. Cannon Hall visible at top center.



It remained in service for more than 46 years until the end of 2007. In February 2008 the ferryboat was sold at auction for \$24,300.

In early 2008, DelDOT commissioned a new ferry, named the *Tina Fallon*. Fallon, a Seaford resident, served in the Delaware General Assembly from 1978 to 2006. Together with improvements to the wharves and slips, the total cost of the project is about \$3.2 million.



Operating the ferry in April 1938. This ferry boat was built in 1937 at a cost of less than \$2,000 by J.E. Friedel's boatyard in Seaford,



Testing the newly completed "Virginia C" ferry boat in March 1961.

FINDING OUT MORE

- For more local history, visit the **Days Gone By Museum** at 4841 Woodland Ferry Road, Seaford, DE 19973. Call Jack or Carolyn Knowles at (302) 629-9889.
- More information regarding the town of **Seaford** can be found at www.seafordde.com/history.cfm.
- Check the website of the non-profit **Woodland Ferry Association** at www.woodlandferry.net/Woodland_Ferry_Assoc.html. The Association was formed in 1993 to organize the 200th anniversary celebration of the ferry. The group promotes the ferry and surrounding historical sites. The Association is also responsible for planning and hosting the annual Woodland Ferry Festival.
- Information regarding **Captain John Smith's Voyage** to the Woodland Ferry area can be found at www.jobsmith400.org/history.htm.
- For a fictionalized but broadly accurate account of the activities of the Cannon family read George Alfred Townsend's 1884 book *The Entailed Hat, or Patty Cannon's Times* (republished by Tidewater Publishers, Cambridge, Maryland in 1955). The full text is also available at www.gutenberg.org/files/19146/19146-b/19146-b.htm.
- The Office of the [Delaware] Bridge Engineer issued a short *History of the Woodland Ferry, Sussex County* in March 1961. This is in the Bill Frank Collection, Box 4, Folder 40, at the Historical Society of Delaware in Wilmington, Delaware.
- Original records relating to the ferry can be seen at the **Delaware Public Archives**, Dover, Delaware (www.archives.delaware.gov). The **Delaware Historical Society**, Wilmington, Delaware (www.hsd.org) also holds material on the ferry.
- A more detailed history of the ferry and a description of the archaeological discoveries of 2007 can be found in Hunter Research, Inc. *Archaeological Investigation: Replacement of Woodland Ferry and Facility Improvements. Woodland, Broad Creek and Seaford Hundreds, Sussex County, Delaware* (2008). This report is available on the Delaware Department of Transportation's website (www.deldot.gov/archaeology).
- The ferry is operated by the **Delaware Department of Transportation** (www.deldot.gov). For general information contact **Public Relations** at (302) 760-2080 or (800) 652-5600 (in-state only), or email: dotpr@state.de.us.

Ferry slip on the left bank



Ferryboat Tina Fallon, 2008



Cannon Hall



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